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ABSTRACT

A project was conducted to increase the retention of African American men in the Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council's literacy program. The project's primary objectives were as follows: develop a program in self-esteem, goal setting, and decision making and use it as a "draw" to bring new students into the literacy program; build participants' self-esteem by helping them address the barriers that often prevent students from continuing in education programs; and improve retention of students, particularly African American men, in the literacy program. The self-esteem program, which was called Thresholds, was designed to teach a seven-step decision-making process while simultaneously enabling each client to understand his own thought processes. The program, which was taught with a workbook written on a fifth-grade level, featured one-to-one consultations to help students feel comfortable with the program and the decisions they were making. During the classes, individual experiences were related to Black history. Most students considered the program very valuable, and several credited it with helping them get jobs and/or improving their relations with others. Attendance at the 12-hour program averaged 6-8 hours. (MN)

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Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council

Thresholds: A Program to Increase the Retention of African-American Men in a Literacy Program

Final Report
August 1994

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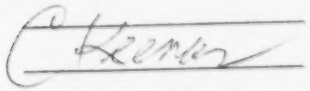

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Thresholds: A Program to Increase the Retention of African-American Men in a Literacy Program

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Introduction

The purpose of the mini-grant *Thresholds* was to increase the retention of students, particularly African American men, in GPLC's literacy program. This was to be achieved by having a group of students work through a self esteem program based on improving goal-setting and decision making skills. The objectives of the project were a) to bring new students into the literacy program using this course as a "draw" b) to build the self esteem of the participants by helping them to address the barriers that often prevent students from continuing in an education program and c) to improve retention of students in the literacy program, particularly African American men. The report on this project would be of interest to instructors and administrators of literacy programs.

The *Thresholds* program was offered in three ten-week sessions between July 15, 1993 and June 30, 1994. The project director, Eugenia Newman, was responsible for carrying out the project. Ms. Newman has been an area coordinator for GPLC for four years. As a former literacy student herself and a resident of the project area, she was particularly sensitive to the interconnection of self-esteem and literacy training. Diane Daniels, a long time volunteer for GPLC, led the classes.

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Statement of Problem

Low self esteem is a major obstacle affecting African-American students, particularly men, in the Pittsburgh area. Those who enter literacy programs often leave before they have reached their goals, usually when their program of study becomes more difficult or personal problems intensify. Because they have not had a history of success, they assume that a set back is a permanent barrier and that they will never succeed in education. Not being able to read further isolates them, imprisoning them within limitations that are to some extent self-made.

The Thresholds Program was offered to students in the hope that the clear, step-by - step decision making process which it entails would help students set realistic personal goals and follow through on them. We felt that as participants gained control over their personal lives, the rise in self- esteem would contribute to greater success in making and attaining educational goals.

Goals and Objectives

1) to increase the retention rate of students, particularly African-American males in the Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council's literacy training program
2) to help the participants build self esteem by teaching them a process-oriented method of setting and obtaining goals
3) to enroll 30 literacy students in the Thresholds program.

Procedures employed:

The program Thresholds is a teaching method and a philosophy. It was originally designed by Milton Burglass in the mid sixties for use with inmates at the Graterford

State Correctional Facility. At that time Mr. Burglass was himself an inmate.

Thresholds serves groups and individuals. In a seven step decision making process a person is taught to chose between two or more possibilities. Decision-making is a skill like any other -- it has to be learned and it has to be practiced. The program allows the instructor and students to focus on the cognitive processes. Two integrated activities are involved: 1. teaching a process of decision making 2. enabling the client to understand his own thought processes

This program was taught with a workbook written on a fifth grade level. The seven steps were also defined with signs that are easily identified for a lower level reader. The first classes of Thresholds dealt with self worth and self development from adolescence to adulthood. Individual experiences were related to Black History. The class emphasized that in order to set attainable goals, a person must first understand and respect who he is. Time lines and strategies for accomplishing goals were developed by each participant. Most of goals set were for solving serious personal problems which were currently preventing participants from giving attention to vocational or educational goals. (Problems ranged from dealing with serious illness in the family, to problems with children, homelessness, unemployment, and "staying out of jail.") Later classes were spent working through the material in the workbook, a decision making unit with these components:

1. A definition of the problem or barrier situation. (This was individual to each student.)
2. A formulation of a set of possible courses of action
3. A careful evaluation of the set of possibilities
4. An application of a set of criteria for making decisions that are clear and realistic.
5. The decision

6. Taking the steps that make the decision happen. (enactment of the decision)
7. Reviewing the consequences of the decision

One-to-one consultations were used to help participants feel comfortable with the program and with the decisions that they were making and, of course, to make sure they understood the material presented.

Fourteen people participated in the course. This was a good deal lower than the thirty that we had wished to enroll. Attendance at the 10 week (12 hour) sessions ranged from nearly perfect (three students attended 11.5 hrs) to 3 hours (two students). The average attendance was 6 - 8 hours. Three women participated in the second session of the class.

Most students reported that they found the class very valuable. One participant, who had been unemployed at the beginning of the class, got a job and credited the class with giving him the confidence to go out and look for a job. Another said that he had viewed himself as a "bad man" but with the help of the class was able to see himself in a more positive light. An American Indian participant said that working with a class of Black students gave her the confidence to express herself. She indicated that she often felt intimidated by white people and their negative judgments and low expectations of Native Americans.

The instructor felt that some of the students who had been attracted by the subject matter of the class were overwhelmed by the very problems that they were trying to find a way to solve. They were unable to step far enough outside the immediate emergency to get the perspective necessary to work through a decision making process.

The second session which was held from mid April to mid June was the most successful in terms both of enrollment and enthusiasm of the participants. The seven students in the class all reported greater confidence in their decision making skills. In post class interviews, a core group of students requested that the class reconvene in September as a small reading group. These students

wished to continue to pursue issues of personal and racial identity as they relate to goal setting and decision making. This is the class that had women participants, and the instructor was an African-American woman. This raises the question of whether the class would have had greater or more enthusiastic male participation if the class had had a male instructor.

The ultimate impact of the class on retention of these students cannot be determined at this time. Nine of the fourteen students who participated in the project were still involved with the class through June 1994. We will follow these students through 1994 / 95. At that time we will compare the attendance rates of the students who participated in Thresholds with a control group of students who did not.

Comments and Conclusions

If the instructor of the class is willing to continue as a volunteer or to train someone else to lead the class, we will continue to offer this class as a small reading group to interested students. This kind of self-help class is rarely offered to economically disadvantaged students who are not involved in "treatment" programs.

There are some things that we would change before offering this class again. We would continue to recruit students from the three contiguous inner city neighborhoods with largely African American populations. However, we would make this recruitment on-going, and try to involve more of our community referral sources. This time we relied too heavily on students who had already approached our agency so few new students were drawn in as a result of the class itself.

We will be somewhat less reluctant to mix students from different neighborhoods. At first we didn't recruit students from different neighborhoods because of the gang situation in Pittsburgh. However, when the Wilkinsburg coordinator wanted some of her students in the class, we agreed to place the class in a neutral location and mix the students. The second session, the most successful of the classes, drew students from two neighborhoods, Wilkinsburg as well as

Homewood. This is the class that would like to continue to work together in the fall.

Stretching only 12.5 hours of materials into a ten week session is too long and just unnecessary for most students. Originally we had chosen to do this so that students could continue to work with their tutors. We now think both attendance and continuity of learning would be greater with six two or two and a half hour sessions. Many of the students who chose to take the class were in life circumstances that were too volatile for ten week sessions to be practical. Since students often chose between basic skills tutoring or the class, there was little gain in scheduling both activities in the same weeks.

Both of the literacy coordinators involved in the class stated that the class would be best used in a shortened version at the very beginning of a student's literacy training. The classes would be one component in a orientation program designed to keep students focused on their personal goals and the educational goals that flow from them.